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ABSTRACT

Japanese universities have been characterized by critics as "leisurelands" where students concentrate too much on amusements and too little on learning. While university experience for Japanese students does not always result in acquiring testable academic knowledge as efficiently as in high school, the university does provide a setting for a moratorium period during which they acquire many kinds of non-academic learning. The importance of this moratorium period can only be understood in the wider context of the educational and work institutions of Japanese society. This study, involving in-depth interviews of 84 students from 15 universities in Tokyo, Nagoya, Sendai, ad Osaka, examines the role of university education in the lives of Japanese youth. The study reveals that university students don't feel particularly under pressure to work hard in school, because employment hiring practices are heavily weighted in favor of the name of the college attended, not academic achievement. In addition, most companies don't rely on colleges to train the future employee because the companies do their own training. College entrance exams are the main hiring credentials used to measure student capability. College freedom in Japan is an opportunity to explore oneself and one's relation to society. (Author/GLR)

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TITLE: College as Moratorium:

The Hidden Functions of Japanese College Education

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ABSTRACT: Japanese universities have been characterized by critics as "leisurelands" where students concentrate too much on amusements and too little on learning. While it may be correct to say that university students do not acquire testable academic knowledge as efficiently as they did in high school, the university provides a setting for a moratorium period during which they acquire many kinds of non-academic learning. The importance of this moratorium period can only be understood in the wider context of the educational and work institutions of Japanese society. This study examines the role of university education in the lives of Japanese young people. It was conducted by means of in-depth interviews of 84 students from 15 universities in Tokyo, Nagoya, Sendai and Osaka.

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Japanese pre-college education is widely recognized as accomplishing the goal of the transmission of academic knowledge. High school graduates in Japan, it is claimed, score as well on certain objective tests as college graduates in the United States (Rohlen). While there may be criticisms of the stress on rote learning in high school, of the domination of the high school curriculum by the requirements of the college entrance examinations, and of the pressure which is put on students to excel, in terms of objective testable knowledge, there can be no question of the excellence of Japanese pre-college education (Rohlen).

University education in Japan has been widely criticized on many counts. Some critics claim that university education does not encourage creativity, that students are encouraged to be passive, and the subjects are taught too theoretically, without enough stress on practical application (Sakakibara). These same criticisms might be applied to Japanese high schools. However, there is another point of criticism which is clearly limited to university education. It is widely believed that students don't study very much in college, that the international lead that students had after graduation from high school is lost during the college years (Murakami). Japanese college graduates in fact score at about the same level in some tests of academic learning as American college graduates.

Japanese critics have described colleges as "leisurelands," where students are far more focused on enjoyment of life than on study. Students are not required to study hard to succeed; Japanese universities are characterized as difficult to enter but very easy to graduate from, once admission has been gained (Murakami). It would seem that the obvious solution is to make university education more rigorous and to raise standards for graduation. Before making changes however, it is important to examine the function which the university, as presently constituted, serves in the lives of students, to examine how students view their education and how the period of university education meshes with the periods of education which precede it and with the period of work which follows.

METHODOLOGY

The study is an attempt to examine the university experience within the context of the lives of young people. The research was conducted by means of 84 in-depth interviews of male and female students from four year colleges in Tokyo, Nagoya, Sendai and Osaka. The students come from fifteen different colleges.

Japanese colleges are ordered by rank; in this sample, colleges of the highest rank such as the national universities and the highest ranking private universities are represented, along with colleges of middle and low rank. Small and large universities are represented as well as coed and all-female schools.

ATTITUDES TOWARD COLLEGE

Students generally expressed a very positive attitude toward college life. While in high school, they looked forward to college as a time of stimulation and freedom and, perhaps after some initial difficulties in making the transition from the lifestyle of high school, most students reported that they enjoyed being university students.

Two themes stood out in students' descriptions of their lives:

(a) college is a time of unparalleled freedom

(b) college is a unique period during which students have the opportunity to learn about themselves and about society.

COLLEGE AS A TIME OF FREEDOM

When asked to describe what college was like, the most common response given by students was that it was a time of freedom from control, from work and from responsibility. As some studnts put it,

> College is a place to enjoy life. A high school student should study hard, but in college we rarely study. We have fours years to have fun, to be free. If you go to work right after high school, you miss that. You have no free time.

> College students are not expected to work hard but to enjoy their free time. They have little responsiblity for society.

> Students try to enjoy the time they are in college as much as possible, with doing parttime work, travelling, dating, because it is the time that they have the most freedom in their lives.

Students reported that they often skip their classes, especially during the first two years of college. In addition, many students study very little for most of their classes. Taking advantage of this freedom not to study is seen as permissible for students, as meeting with approval, or at least, not with disapproval, from the rest of society. As one student put it,

> ...today /college students_/ are not expected to study so hard. The purpose of being in college has become vague. Students are not necessarily expected to be serious, to work hard. They are allowed to do anything they want to do. Some some students are apt to spend their college years in idleness, but in general people don't blame them.

LIFE AS A RAILROAD: COLLEGE AS A SLOW TRAIN

Why is this freedom so valued by students and why is it tacitly approved of by society? The answer to this can be seen in examining the larger structure into which college education fits.

Students are well aware that college is a unique time of freedom, that it it very different from the time that comes before and the time that will come after for them. The importance of this period of freedom is accentuated by the fact that, for most people, activities over the course of life are rather rigidly scheduled and it is not possible for most people to "drop out" for a while, should they feel the need to do so.

Students often used the metaphor of a railroad to describe their lives. They had to get on the railroad in kindergarten and they cannot get off, or take a break, until retirement. Thus, during most of the active years of life, there are no opportunities to take time off; rather, they must continue on the societally prescribed schedule.

One cannot for example, easily take time off between high school and college (except in order to do an intense period of study for the entrance examinations). If a student takes time off to work for

a few years, (s)he will find it difficult to pass the entrance exams later, since (s)he will have forgotten much of the relevant material (s)he crammed in high school.

In addition, even if such a student is admitted to college late, (s)he may find it difficult to function in the college environment. In most schools, other students will be the regulation age, so will find it strange to associate with an older student.

A student who had spent a year in an American high school made the following observation:

> In Japan, decisions must be made in certain time periods. In the U. S., I found many students in the University whose age was more than 22....Whenever they decide that they want to, they go to college. People don't think that is strange or different. In Japan, I students are more than 23 or 24, people think that is strange.

In addition, having a gap in one's educational record may cause problems later, when one is looking for a job.

> People can get off the railroad, but if you do it is uncommon. If you have a very high ability, or some very good reason, it may be ok, but if you just want to take a break and work for 2 or 3 years, it's not common in Japan and it will be difficult later to get into a good company. If you have a very high skill, it may not matter, but if you are a common person, it is not so good.

It is also inadvisable to take a break between college and work, especially if one plans to "enter a company." The hiring "season" is during the latter part of senior year and newly hired students are expected to begin work in April, one month after graduation. Any variation in this schedule will make a student a less desirable employee. The student quoted below, because she lived in an unfavorable location, was not able to get a job she wanted during the hiring season. Due to the necessity of doing things according to schedule however, she decided to take that job rather than to look for a better one.

> I have gotten a job, but I'm still not sure it's the right job for me. I can still choose to say no, but if I refuse this job, it will be very difficult to find another job after graduation. Now is the only time to get a job in many

companies. It is hard to get a job after graduation because companies say that summer vacation is the time for hiring students....If I wait til graduation, it will be hard to get a job. And it will be even more difficult if I wait until the next job-hunting season. Usually Japanese companies want to hire people who have just graduated. Usually, we graduate in March and start working in the company in April. This is the natural way.

It would be reasonable to assume that many people would find it difficult to "stay on the railroad" if all parts of the trip were equally demanding. However, while going through life may be as scheduled as travelling on a railroad, all parts of the trip are not equally rapid and pressured. It is true that the portions of the trip before college, that is, the junior high school and high school years, are for most students periods of pressure, hard work, and limited freedom. In addition, the period after college when most male students will join a company, also requires long hours of work and limits freedom in the sense that rather strict conformity is required in style of dress, in interactional style and in the expression of opinions. Since college is a much less pressured time however, being in college is a way in which one can stay on the railroad, keep on schedule, retain the identity that comes with participating in society as a student, yet "take a break" at the same time. As one student put it:

> We cannot take a break between elementary and high school. In high school, we must study to get into university. After we pass one hurdle, we must go to the next goal. We cannot take time off....We don't have a chance to take a break, so college life is a break. Until college or university, we keep striving, but in college we take a rest. On the surface, we don't have any break: we go from junior high school to senior high school to the college to the company. But in reality, we have a break. We have a college ID; we can say, "I am a student of this college." But at the same time, we can do a parttime job, we can travel. So it's a kind of freedom. Even if you don't do anything, you can say "I am a student of this college."

Thus, it can be argued that university provides students with a much needed period of freedom. Perhaps rather than needing to be "reformed" to make the same kinds of demands as other periods in Japanese life, the period of university education is needed as a time of freedom before assuming the heavy burdens of work life.

SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS: PERMISSION TO RELAX

University students report that they do not feel particularly under pressure to work hard in school. Why does society tolerate this lack of work on the part of students? Parents in Japan in general finance their children's educations; why do they not demand good grades from students? Companies are meticulously careful in their recruitment processes. Why do they not assign greater importance to candidates' college grades?

The explanation for this seeming oddity lies in the employment practices of companies. Companies tend to weight the name of the student's college very highly in employment decisions, far more heavily than the quality of the student's academic career in college. Companies do not rely on colleges to train students as most companies invest heavily in training their own personnel. Rather, the companies use the college entrance exams as a kind of screening device to find the most capable young people. As one student put it,

> To tell the truth...the companies really don't expect too much from us. We feel that the studies we do in universities have nothing to do with the work of the companies. To get into a university in Japan, in the first place, means that we have the ability. Therefore, companies hire college students although they know that students cut class and play all the time. What we mean by "companies don't expect too much" is that as long as the students are clever, the companies can educate them to fill the company's needs.

Both students and parents are extremely aware of these hiring practices. Thus, parents pressure students to perform well in high school in order to get into a good university, but there is little pressure to perform well in college. As one student said,

> In Japan, the final goal is to get into a good university. Many parents want their son or daughter to go to a good university so they want them to get into a good junior high school and a good senior high school. Once they get into a good college, the possibility that they will get into a good company is very high. So to get into a good college is the final goal. The real goal is to get into a good company, but to do that you have to get into a good university.

FREEDOM TO LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE: KNOWLEDGE FROM A VARIETY OF SOURCES

The freedom of college is not only a freedom from constraint. It is also a positive freedom, the freedom to have new experiences, to explore oneself and one's relation to society in a way that cannot be done in either high school or after entering a company.

According to many students, their major goal in college is to expand their knowledge of life, a kind of knowledge which can sometimes be gained from books and classes, but which also must come from other sources. Students often feel that until now decisions have been made for them. They have been heavily influenced by their parents so they may be confused about what they themselves want out of life or they may not be sure how to distinguish what they want from what their parents want for them. Students express this desire in a variety of ways. In answer to the question, "What is the most important goal for students to accomplish in college?" several students answered as follows:

> The role of college students is to find themselves and to develop themselves and to establish themselves. Japanese college students usually have no chance to look at themselves until they get to college. They are almost children in a sense. Although they have to learn to be mature, it is very difficult to do so because their teachers and most of the world treat them as children. I think that the most important thing to Japanese students is to find out who they are, even if it may be late.
>
> Students are expected to think about themselves, to create their own personalities. We have to develop our own ideas and decide what to do in the future. We must expand our views, not only studying in college but studying widely in the society.
>
> What is important for college students is to experience a variety of things and to know their possibilities. We think it is lucky to get a chance to spend four years thinking about our lives.

Students often express the idea that the path to self-development is through having a variety of experiences in college. What may look like a waste of time to an adult is actually, according to some

students, time very well spent.

> After people enter college, they have plenty of time to do what they want to do. Some students enjoy their hobbies. Some people are crazy about doing their part-time jobs. Even if college students don't study and spend a lot of time enjoying themselves, these experiences sometimes teach them valuable things for the future.
>
> Whatever people do in college, if it's useful to find themselves, everything will be okay even if it seems to other people like killing time. If they can use what they do to find themselves in their work or their lives, it's luck and happy.

However, since college is literally their first opportunity to do this kind of self-directed exploration, taking advantage of freedom of choice is difficult at first for some students. First year students commonly go through "May sickness" (so-called because the college term begins in April); "May sickness" may be described as a feeling of disappointment and disorientation which occurs when students make the transition from high school life, which is oriented toward the single goal of passing the entrance examination, to the freer and less structured atmosphere of college. First year students, experiencing this malaise, describe themselves as listless and their college life as boring and meaningless. One student, after entering the top ranked university of his dreams, described his life as follows:

> I sleep and eat and watch tv and do my parttime job. It's very boring.

Cure for "May sickness" comes when students find some interest which grips them and makes them feel that they are learning and developing in ways that are important to them. There are many possible routes to this development. Some students become involved in their studies, particularly in their major. Others read extensively on their own. Still others become interested in their part-time jobs. Part-time jobs may be important experiences in themselves; but they are also important because they finance students' participation in clubs and trips, two of the major foci of college activity. An important aspect of development for almost all students is meeting new people, learning to cooperate and to socialize with people different from themselves.

In contrast to high school, where study is oriented to the entrance examinations, and heavily

focused on memorization, students in college can study in a less regimented way for classes and can also find time to read and study on their own.

Part-time jobs are also a new and pleasurable experience. Part-time jobs are forbidden by many high schools as distractions from study, so few high school students work (Rohlen). Working in college can be an interesting experience in itself and it also gives students their first access to their own money which they can use as they please.

College students need this money to finance two favorite activities: college clubs and travel. College clubs play a central role on Japanese campuses. Students usually belong to only one club during their college career; ordinarily, this club will require a great investment of time and energy, often meeting several times per week. In return for this investment however, students gain valuable experiences. They form close friendships, learn how to function within the hierarchical relationships which are so important in Japanese society, and develop skill in the club activity.

Meeting new kinds of people is one of the main attractions of college life and one of the main ways by which students think they will gain experience of the world. The friendship world of high school is narrow and students meet only people much like themselves from the same geographical area. In college classes and clubs and through part time jobs, however, one may come in contact with a variety of people from all parts of Japan.

> Students should make a lot of friends so they can learn about human relationships. If they are in contact with people who have different characters, they can become generous and learn to accept different types of people.
>
> It is important to experience good and bad relationships between people. We must not only study hard but also connect with many kinds of people.
>
> We are expected to be more social in order to accomodate to the society: making friends, experiencing a lot of things.

Meeting new people is valuable for its own sake, but in addition students are aware that it will be helpful to them later in life. As one student put it,

> We are expected to behave as members of

society. Japanese companies expect college students to be good at teamwork in the company so we must have a lot of experience with people.

Clubs are especially useful in teaching members how to cooperate and how to be comfortable relating to superiors and to "juniors."

In my club, there are freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors. So when a student is a sophomore, she will learn how to talk to people who are younger than she is and also to people who are superior to her. That's like a practice. jWhen you go into society, you have to do that in your work, so I think it's a good practice to do it.

/In college_/ I wanted to meet a variety of people....Now I am in Noh Drama Club. In the club, I want to learn about the relationships between the seniors and juniors. I don't just want to be with peers, but also with people who are older and younger than I am.

In addition, in college one meets members of the opposite sex. High schools in Japan are not oriented toward coed socializing; in fact there is a great deal of separation of the sexes (Rohlen). For many students, college the first opportunity to become comfortable interacting with the opposite sex.

This kind of self exploration which became possible when students entered college will become difficult again once they begin to work. In many companies, the hours will be very long; male employees in some companies work until 9 or 10 pm every night and engage in business entertaining on weekends. Therefore, the time for exploring a variety of stimulating activities will be limited. Students are well aware of this upcoming limitation. One observation commonly made by students in explaining their eagerness to travel is that college is the last time that they will the have time to travel. Traditionally, in companies, even though people get vacations, they generally do not take only a few days off at a time. Therefore, they are unable to go on long trips. Students are very conscious of this and thus feel that if they want to take an overseas vacation, they must do it now because they will not get another opportunity. In the following quote, a student describes how even women office workers have a difficult time taking vacations.

In companies, women have more free time than

men, because women aren't working as seriously. So when they ask for a holiday, they can get it relatively easily. So my friends from junior college now take 2 or 3 day vacations if they want. But compared to vacations in college, 2 or 3 days is too short and they cannot travel far away. Many of them want to travel to Hokkaido or abroad or to Okinawa, but these are far away so they must do this kind of travelling in college.

Conclusion

Though college in Japan may not be as rigorous as high school and though students may be engaged in many activities other than study, the more leisurely pace of college gives students the time engage in the experiences which will help them become, in the words of one student, "members of society." Perhaps, in a hard-working society like Japan, it a necessary to have a moratorium period in which exploration of self and society is encouraged. In the words of one student,

> College students want to learn what they want to do in the future and how they want to lead their lives. So they try various things. College students enjoy their free time, their free lives, because they can only do this as students. They experience as many things as possible, because only a youth can do this and only during college. Such experiences may be important to their future. Campus life may be the period that makes childlike thinking into adult thinking. College is the place to become a better person, to get more experience, more practice, more training so that a person can become suited to society.

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